

Fall 2019

## Muslim-American Democratic Citizens: Dismantling Rituals with Tarbiyah

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Muslim-American Democratic Citizens:

Dismantling Rituals with *Tarbiyah*

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Introduction: Afros, Tattoos, and Muslim Immigrants</b> . . . . .	4
<b>Part One: The Problem – Ritual Performances and Collective Memory</b> . . . . .	8
Collective Memory and Superior Culture . . . . .	9
Ritual Performances and Forming the Sacred . . . . .	11
Insular Communities: Biting the Hand that Feeds . . . . .	14
Immigrant Assimilation: Reconciling Double Consciousness . . . . .	17
The Risk of Conflating Culture and Religion . . . . .	21
<b>Part Two: The Goal – Critically-Engaged Muslim-American Democratic Citizens</b> . . . . .	22
Abandoning Old Rituals and Establishing New . . . . .	24
Cosmopolitan Islam: A Religion Meant for Everyone . . . . .	27
Democratic Muslim-Americans: Focusing on the Inner-Self . . . . .	28
Democratic Muslim-Americans: Civic Engagement . . . . .	32
<b>Part Three: The Solution – <i>Tarbiyah</i> and <i>Tasawwuf</i> for Democratic Citizenship</b> . . . . .	36
<i>Tarbiyah</i> in Practice . . . . .	38
<i>Tarbiyah</i> , <i>Tasawwuf</i> , and the Critically Engaged . . . . .	41
Experiential Education for Democratic Citizenship . . . . .	42
<b>Conclusion: Afros, Tattoos, and Lost Opportunities.</b> . . . . .	45
<b>References</b> . . . . .	48

## Abstract

This paper argues that Islamic schools in the United States should return to the traditional Islamic practices of *tarbiyah* and *tasawwuf* to cultivate a critically engaged cosmopolitan Muslim-American identity in order to contribute to an ideal democratic society. *Tarbiyah* is the practice of nurturing the innate characteristics in people. *Tasawwuf* is constant self-reflection to understand oneself. *Tasawwuf* is a personal practice, whereas *tarbiyah* is dealing with others. *Tasawwuf* can lead students to recognizing their capacities and *tarbiyah* can lead educators to nurturing those capacities to their fruition. I explore the role immigrant populations have played in some Islamic schools in inhibiting the development of a sound Muslim-American identity by considering their nostalgic view of their home culture as superior to American culture. Some immigrant Muslim populations in the United States yearn to sustain nostalgic collective memories through ritual performances that revere their presumed “superior hegemonic culture” as almost sacred. This reverence creates the notion that American culture challenges the collective memory, therefore it is seen as profane. I argue that Islamic schools should dismantle these rituals that are in place in order to create spaces that encourage the synthesis of an Islamic identity with an American identity to cultivate a critically engaged cosmopolitan Muslim-American identity.

*Keywords:* sacred, profane, ritual performances, collective memory, superior hegemonic culture, Islamic identity, ideal democracy, democratic citizen, *tasawwuf*, *tarbiyah*, Muslim-American identity

### **Introduction: Afros, Tattoos, and Muslim Immigrants**

I taught fourth grade for two years at a private Islamic school in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Everyone at this school, including students and staff, were Muslim and the majority were South Asian, including myself. Parents were actively involved, influencing the culture and some school policies. The school anchored its curriculum across grade levels in basal textbooks, so I wanted to introduce a new aspect to the curriculum that could tie in current events and culture. I decided to start Hero of the Month.

Every month I strategically chose a public figure for my 4th grade students to study. I challenged my students to learn about and interact with people who they were not used to seeing in their textbooks, and asked myself how I could impart important values to them through their studies of our monthly hero. In October 2017, the media's emphasis on the Take a Knee protests provided an opportunity to discuss an important topic with my fourth graders. Colin Kaepernick would be the Hero of the Month. The general takeaway I wanted to impart was that Kaepernick exemplified courage through standing up for what he believed in, despite the consequences. In addition, by putting his pictures up in my classroom, I wanted students to walk away with the understanding that this value of courage can be present in people from different backgrounds, who look nothing like them, and whose lifestyles are nothing like theirs.

My principal asked to meet with me after my lesson on Kaepernick. A father of one of my students, a police officer, was troubled by the reading piece entitled, "Hero of the Month." Colin Kaepernick was protesting police brutality and the father argued that I was teaching young children that police are brutal by revering Kaepernick as a hero. The principal asked me to look at the pictures of Kaepernick that were presented in the media--tattooed, afro, flexing his bicep at

every touchdown. “Is this the image of a hero we want to impart to our kids?” he asked me, soon after requesting I take down his pictures from my bulletin board.

This situation was eye-opening to me and forced me to look critically at my school community. Here was an Islamic school that prided itself on producing Muslim-Americans that were academically ahead, religiously grounded and civically-engaged. While the students were excited about seeing Kaepernick in the classroom, the administration was not. Although they claimed to be fostering a Muslim-American identity, their response to Kaepernick in their school was telling about what the school actually valued and what rituals were present to keep those values in place. I realized that this immigrant population had equated culture and religion as it strived to hold onto its nostalgic collective memories from its homelands. It had exalted its culture over American culture, and I was concerned about the message this could convey to students. Are the lessons the school is teaching anti-Islamic, anti-American and altogether anti-democratic?

Throughout this paper, I discuss Islamic identities, American identities, and democratic citizenship. Because these terms can have a variety of different meanings, it is important to understand what I mean when I explore them in this paper. When I discuss Islamic identity, I am doing so without the attachment of ethnicity or culture. All countries have their own cultures, therefore on the surface, Islam looks different everywhere. However, here I discuss Islam in a deeper sense. Islamic identity here refers to a critically-engaged identity grounded in self-reflection and self-renewal known as *tasawwuf*. *Tasawwuf* is an Islamic science that aims to develop the inner character and morality of an individual through spirituality (Yusuf, 2004). In Islam, human beings are known to have different components, such as the appetitive soul, the irascible soul, and the rational soul. All are necessary within reason, and when each component

regulates the others, there is justice and morality (Yusuf, 2003). The idea is that a person cannot navigate the world meaningfully until the inner heart and soul have been realized and developed. This is a cosmopolitan Islamic identity, that can be embraced by Muslims from all walks of life, regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, etc.

I have anchored my discussion of democratic citizenship in the writings of John Dewey. Dewey was an American education philosopher from the early to mid-twentieth century. He wrote of a democracy being a work-in-progress with constant citizen engagement. Democracy never comes to an end. Constant change and growth is the essence of democracy (Dewey, 1927). Democratic citizens, then, are constantly changing and engaging as well. They are constantly in a state of reflection to become self-aware of their unique abilities and talents. They utilize these strengths in ways that move society forward. Democratic citizens participate in expansive and meaningful interactions with people from differing backgrounds and ideologies with respect and honor (Noddings, 2013).

The Islamic identity of self-reflection coupled with that of democratic citizenship is what creates a critically-engaged cosmopolitan Muslim-American identity for which I advocate. This identity is guided by knowing oneself and using this knowledge to contribute in meaningful and critical ways that will positively benefit society. I argue that Islamic schools have the capacity to develop Muslim-American identities in their students, and it starts by examining the current state of these schools and communities with a critical eye.

Instead of insulating themselves within the structures of their home cultures, Islamic schools should practice the Islamic tradition of *tarbiyah*. *Tarbiyah* is a tradition of education where students' innate nature and potential is nurtured through a variety of avenues (Tauhidi, 2007). *Tarbiyah* cultivates the unique nature of each individual, and guides children in using

those abilities to serve God by contributing to the world. Following a *tarbiyah* model can organically foster a unique Muslim-American identity that will help move society toward the *ideal democracy* described by John Dewey. Dewey (1916) explained that a democracy is a society where individual interests are met and nurtured, resulting in societal growth from experiences with these diverse interests. I believe that if *tarbiyah* is practiced in Islamic schools, a Muslim-American identity will develop naturally because both the Muslim and American identities are naturally a part of Muslim youth's overall identity development when they grow up in the United States. This Muslim-American identity is imperative for both Islam to thrive in the United States and for the larger American society to benefit and learn from the increasing numbers of Muslims in our country. *Tarbiyah* is democratic education, and I argue that Islamic schools must return to this traditional model.

In order to understand the necessity to return to the tradition of *tarbiyah*, it is important to understand the state of many Islamic schools today. Islamic schools in the United States are mostly composed of immigrant communities from South Asia or the Arab world (Merry, 2005). I examine the values of these immigrant communities and the impact they have had on some Islamic schools. Many immigrant communities long to maintain a collective memory, and this yearning can create a gap between what it means to be an American and what it means to be a Muslim. I will draw on the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1912) to better understand how and why immigrant communities respond to American culture the way they do. There are misconceptions that the two are mutually exclusive and I will discuss the importance of bridging this gap through *tarbiyah* to cultivate a Muslim-American identity.

The use of the term "Muslim" throughout this paper must be clarified before proceeding. In 2017, Pew Research center (*Demographic Portrait of Muslim-Americans*, 2017) released a



study estimating 3.45 million people identifying themselves as Muslim in the United States. This group is ethnically diverse, with African Americans, Arabs, Asians, Whites, Latinos, and more. Throughout this paper, I will be focusing primarily on the South Asian immigrant population of Muslims in America and their children.

In what follows, I break down the complexities of some immigrant populations in Islamic schools into three parts. In Part One, I discuss the issues of ritual performances of immigrants and the reverence of nostalgic collective memories. The discussion will unpack how these beliefs can be problematic to Muslim youth growing up in the United States. Part Two outlines the goal I suggest for Islamic schools, which is to create new cycles of rituals that foster an environment that helps to cultivate a critically-engaged Muslim-American identity, which will ultimately lead to democratic citizenship. Part Three explains how to the practice of *tarbiyah* and *tasawwuf* can help Islamic schools dismantle current rituals and establish new ones to arrive at the goal of a critically-engaged, cosmopolitan, Muslim-American democratic identity.

### **Part One: The Problem -- Ritual Performances and the Collective Memory**

My personal experience with the Colin Kaepernick reading in my particular school motivated me to look deeper into Islamic schools and try to understand the patterns of practice that exist within many schools serving similar immigrant populations. Through research I found that what I experienced was not an isolated occurrence. The rituals that took place in my particular community take place across other immigrant communities as well, and can stand as a barrier between Muslim youth and the cultivation of dynamic Muslim-American identities.

In the sections that follow, I draw on the work of 20th century French sociologist Emile Durkheim to discuss how some Islamic schools strive to maintain the collective memory of immigrant communities through ritual performances that suggest their culture is superior

(Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015). Rituals are a set of actions that are performed regularly. Durkheim argues that all groups of people, whether they claim to be spiritually religious or not, rely on sets of rituals to guide them. Rituals form a cohesion between people. They categorize people into mental systems, which can be understood to comprise a collective consciousness (Durkheim 1995).

The idea of a superior culture can create a gap between what it means to be an American and what it means to be a Muslim. There are misconceptions that the two are mutually exclusive and in Part Three, I discuss the importance of bridging this gap by dismantling rituals through *tarbiyah* and cultivating a Muslim-American identity.

### **Collective Memory and a Superior Culture**

Collective memory is the shared experiences that make up the identity of a group of people (Misztal, 2003). Some immigrant communities yearn to maintain their collective memories from their homelands by sending their children to Islamic schools because the environment there is the same as the environment these students experience at home with their families (Merry, 2005). Parents long for a school environment that is “free from social ills” (Schmidt, 2004b, p.64) and protects their children from the influences of Western society. Immigrants fear this influence will pull their children away from the cultures of their home -- the collective memory. Though cherished by immigrants, collective memory can be a barrier to the cultivation of a Muslim-American identity in Muslim youth.

Durkheim is known for his work in social science and its ties to religious life. Barbara Misztal (2003) discusses Durkheim’s belief “that every society displays and requires a sense of continuity with the past and that the past confers identity on individuals and groups and allows us to see collective memory as one of the elementary forms of social life” (Misztal, 2003, p.129).

The collective memory is what holds a community together, and they are reinforced by ritual performances.

Peter McLaren explains that rituals are not just symbols, rather they “form the warp on which the tapestry of culture is woven, thereby ‘creating’ the world for the social actor; they are indispensable to our allegories, our fables and our parables.” (McLaren, 1999, p.38). However, they must not be understood solely as grand ceremonies, but also as every day, mundane, performances such as day-to-day interactions. Individuals perform rituals even within their interactions with friends, family, and community members. These interactions can be very telling of the collective consciousness (Alexander, 1988). Rituals can oftentimes go unnoticed and pass under the radar; however, they are the most powerful and most telling of a community’s collective beliefs (Quantz, 2011). Much can be learned about a group of people when its rituals are discussed, in this case, the rituals of this immigrant population illustrate the importance of collective memory.

Growing up in the United States, children of immigrants do not share the same collective memory of their parents, yet are still required to participate in the rituals. This can create confusion as Muslim youth in America are forced to reconcile a dual identity. Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher (2015) conducted a study on Pakistani-American youth and their concept of culture based on their immigrant parents. She discusses a “superior culture” that forms among Pakistani families as a result of maintaining the collective memory. In the excerpt below she explains the way in which Muslim immigrant families incorrectly use Islam as a means to impose their cultural practices from “back-home” on their children:

“For parents, the ‘superior culture’ served as a kind of cultural capital grounded in Islam and based on a ‘myth of pure origins.’ It served as a moral compass for families to guide

children and shield them from practices in the larger community that they disapproved of or felt were contrary to Pakistani culture, which was almost always equated with ‘Muslim culture’”(p.208).

Ghaffar-Kucher explains how immigrant families’ fears of losing their home culture resulted in the creation of a “hegemonic version of ethnonational culture that is considered superior to other cultures” (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015, p.208). This culture has formed in these communities as a means to maintain their collective memory, a nostalgia. In his book, *Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis describes nostalgia as positive memories in the context of an undesirable present (Davis, 1979). An example many can relate to is college memories. It is common for people to look back at their days in college and feel nostalgic as they go through the motions of adult responsibilities like a full-time job and bills. Similarly, Muslim immigrant families desire to hold onto the memories and customs from their past in the American context because it clashes greatly with their culture from back home. The hegemonic culture they practice is meant to combat the American culture that they live in. They fear the influence of American culture on their children and the loss of collective memory and shared beliefs (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015).

### **Ritual Performances and Forming the Sacred**

Central to Durkheim’s theory of religion is the understanding of the sacred and the profane and their formation through rituals. The sacred is what is seen as extraordinary and set apart from everything else. The sacred can be an object, a deity, or a belief. In contrast, the profane is anything that is ordinary, or anything that challenges or poses a threat to what has been deemed as sacred. (Rosati, 2003).

In *Schooling and the Survival of Community*, Alan Peshkin (1978) captures the rituals in a small town that he's given the pseudonym Mansfield. Throughout the book, Peshkin discusses parts of a community that anyone would recognize. Louis M. Smith (1982) reviews Peshkin's book, and it is valuable to look at what he writes at length in order to draw a comparison with some Islamic schools in the United States:

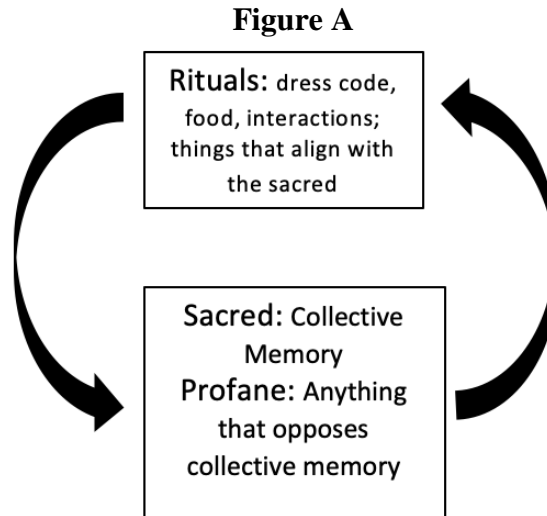
"Peshkin describes events we all know about; he isolates and highlights them. Football games entice over a third of the town; they are a major social event. The curriculum differentiates into "book subjects" and "practical courses." Teachers with small-town backgrounds occupy Mansfield classrooms. Classroom and extracurricular activities have an ideological overlay which is in some instances more important than their content. Examples are a Teens for Christ group and a Future Farmers of America club...school board membership, recruiting and training of teachers, educational programs, etc., all seem interdependent and congruent with community values."(p.978).

Although they may seem like ordinary events, through a Durkheimian lens it can be argued that these are ritual performances in Mansfield that celebrate a certain lifestyle and value system as something parallel to "sacred." Peshkin critiques the town in that personal identity and social consolidation are valued more than intellectuality and national ideals (Smith, 1982). There are parallels that can be drawn between Mansfield and Islamic schools in the United States in immigrant communities.

Garbi Schmidt is a professor of intercultural studies in Denmark. In 2004, she published a book entitled *Islam in Urban America*. It contains a wealth of information on the South Asian and Arab immigrant Muslim community in Chicago, Illinois. Schmidt describes what she observed in her excerpt below:

“People dressed alike. People ate the same kinds of foods. People were aware of the significance of specific time-bound celebrations. People shared certain views on gender and interactions between genders and very often shared an ethnic commonality of language and cuisine. People shared the feeling of being challenged by the outside society.” (p.62).

What Schmidt has observed in this Islamic school are rituals that have created a collective belief that reveres the collective memory as the sacred. Figure A below illustrates how rituals establish the sacred and how the sacred dictates rituals.



Just as in Mansfield, rituals in Islamic schools like the one I taught in can revolve around collective memory and cultural maintenance. In a school community where all board members, parent volunteers, teachers and staff were Muslim and from South Asian immigrant backgrounds, the very image of Colin Kaepernick was in opposition with what the collective memory would dictate a noble hero to look like. With these Muslim immigrants coming from places like the Arab world and South Asia, the image of Kaepernick on their school’s wall was a threat to their sacred: the superior culture they were trying to maintain. Regardless of him being an example of courage, the image of a Black man with an afro and tattoos playing football was

not an image that would come from their collective memory. It disrupts the cycle of rituals that is illustrated in Figure A, and it was enough for Kaepernick to be seen as “profane.” This incident illustrates that this Islamic school is not constructing its curriculum around Islamic values, in this case courage and valor. Instead, the curriculum is constructed around a collective belief about what is sacred and what is profane.

Active engagement with anything other than the culture of their ancestors is deemed a threat to the collective memory. However, Islam’s concept of culture is much different than the one some immigrant populations have constructed which is the delusion of their culture being superior to all others. To protect their collective memories, they choose to disengage and isolate themselves from the rest of society. In the section that follows, I discuss this pattern of isolation and how it is anti-democratic and anti-Islamic.

### **Insular Communities: Biting the Hand that Feeds**

After the horrific acts on September 11, 2001, many Muslims in the United States were treated as scapegoats for the heinous crimes of a small group. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported 1,717 hate crimes against Muslims in the days immediately following 9/11. (Schmidt, 2008). Abdullah Sahin (2018) is a Reader in Islamic education at the University of Warwick. He discusses misunderstandings between cultures in diverse societies that cause isolation, fear, and division. He argues that these are harmful to the growth of democracy.

“The irrational fear of the ‘other’ and cultural plurality have begun to put humanity into a regressive mode of desiring to return to an ‘imagined’ past seeking solace in an idealized ‘pure identity narrative’. This threatens the inclusive nature of democratic societies and deepens the structural inequalities in these societies” (p.23).

Fear is caused by a lack of understanding and being forced to engage with what we don't know (Nussbaum, 2014). The terrorist attacks on 9/11 awoke a fear among non-Muslims (Schmidt, 2008) which resulted in an intense tension between who Muslims actually are and who many non-Muslims think they are. The rise of social media has amplified the noise and allowed this misunderstanding to grow and lead to hate crimes across the nation. Muslim families have been essentially forced to respond out of fear of what might happen if they do not (Merry, 2005).

Some families fear the loss of a collective memory and the creeping influence of American culture. They rely on cultural maintenance through isolation and ritual performances (Merry, 2005). They send their children to private Islamic schools and, in the worst cases, completely disengage with mainstream American culture out of fear of being pressured to lose their identity and practices. This can be problematic because it can stigmatize Muslims further by creating a bigger barrier between Muslim communities and mainstream American culture (Sahin, 2018).

Schmidt describes the parent involvement in an Islamic school which she studied: "Because these schools depend on parents for financial support, they are keenly sensitive to those parents' demands and perceptions of what the children are required to know" (Schmidt, 2004b, p. 62). Parents choose to send their children to Islamic schools to control their social experiences, and limit the environment to shield them from outside influences, and maintain the collective memory and hegemonic culture they've created. "Muslim full-time schools actively promoted exclusionism from American society on the basis of religion" (Schmidt, 2004, p.65). Alan Peshkin (1988) observed this similar pattern at Bethany Baptist Academy and describes it as "biting the hand that feeds you" (Peshkin, 1988, p.291). Despite living in the United States and benefitting from the privilege to practice religion freely, some immigrant communities



disengage from society and do not contribute. In the case of Kaepernick, he represented the Black community whose struggles and culture had no place in the collective memory of these immigrant Muslims. Therefore, engagement with the Take a Knee protest and having Kaepernick on the wall was seen as profane regardless of the importance Islam places on justice for all.

These communities have conflated their “superior culture” with Islam and therefore deemed only their own cultural practices as “Islamic.” However, Islamic values can be applied across all different cultures and people. The Prophet Muhammad was recorded as saying, “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Let him claim it wherever he finds it” (Elias, n.d.). Scholars of Islam interpret this to mean that Muslims need not limit their Islamic education to Islamic texts and resources but that they can take lessons from anywhere (Rabbani, 2016). Isolation can prevent Islamic school students from identifying learning opportunities outside the realm of their home culture, thus depriving them of the opportunity to organically develop their identity.

Islam is a religion that not only embraces all cultures, but celebrates them as a means to beautify the religion (Sahin, 2018). I believe that some Muslim immigrant communities are sacrificing their Islamic values by revering collective memories as the sacred. They focus on the tangible skills and what is visible Islamic knowledge, while ignoring the essence of the religion that should pervade all areas of life, which is simply being Muslim (Tauhidi, 2007). Islamic education is more than just facts and rules. It requires that compassion, morality, and wisdom are reflected in Muslims’ daily actions and speech. Values like these cannot be taught through a banking method of education, as it usually is (Tauhidi, 2007) where facts and knowledge are merely dispensed onto students through lectures and rote memorization. Instead, it must be

implemented with experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) with an emphasis on critical thought, intellectuality, and through *tarbiyah*.

Islamically, there is nothing wrong with looking to Kaepernick as an example to learn about courage because the value of courage is highly regarded in Islam. However, there is a misunderstanding that if a thing does not align with the collective memory, then it does not align with Islam. This misinformation causes Muslim youth to struggle in trying to simultaneously live in opposing identities, which can sometimes result in abandoning religion altogether.

### **Immigrant Assimilation: Reconciling Double Consciousness**

Total isolation can be a threat to an ideal democracy and the development of a Muslim-American identity. Some argue for the opposite extreme and suggest Muslims in America assimilate. They try to hide their Muslim identity out of fear of being misunderstood or treated unjustly. As generations pass, the Muslim identity diminishes with individuals eventually losing their core Islamic values. These people begin to only see themselves as “culturally Muslim” -- unable to connect with the Muslim community on a religious level and feeling like they do not belong (Morgan, 2014). At the same time, they are not completely assimilated into mainstream “American” culture, because of their background or simply because of how they look. Many feel confused and frustrated in trying to reconcile dual identities, not feeling like they belong in either space (Au, Brown, Calderón, 2014).

Imam Omar Suleiman is a Muslim-American scholar and founder of Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. In an article discussing identity formation in Muslim youth in America, Suleiman addresses the internalized racism some first-generation immigrants face. “Internalized racism involves ingesting, often subconsciously, acceptance of the dominant society’s stereotypes of one’s ethnic group” (Suleiman, 2017, p.5). The Muslim community in America is

already marginalized. Some Muslims experience constant anxiety about being misunderstood as believers in a violent, terrorist-breeding religion. Instead of correcting this false view of Islam, some Muslims tend to disassociate with the religion and try to appear as “less Muslim” as possible.

Suleiman reports on a study that exposed the internalized racism and struggle Muslim children face in trying to reconcile a dual identity. Stereotypes about the Muslim community force Muslim youth to try to blend in as much as possible when in non-Muslim spaces. “They distinguished between ‘American’ and ‘Muslim’...they often felt like they had to choose the easier identity to fit in depending on their environment” (Suleiman, 2017, p.7). The study concluded that 1 in 6 children would sometimes pretend not to be Muslim (Suleiman, 2017, p.8).

Total assimilation is detrimental to the development of a Muslim-American democratic identity because it silences the extraordinary qualities that come with people from different backgrounds. Assimilating can inhibit the growth of a democratic society by denying people the opportunity to learn from the varied unique experiences present in the society. Where the ideal democracy calls for unity through the interplay of unique identities, assimilation enforces uniformity through sometimes oppressive and painful rituals that can strip people of their unique backgrounds.

Education lays the groundwork for an individual’s identity to form, and it is imperative that Islamic schools practice *tarbiyah* to discourage total assimilation by focusing on and nurturing the unique potential within children. Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016), discuss the idea of assimilation by immigrant communities in a world that is dominated by White-centric ideologies . Some Chinese and Japanese Americans, for example, attempted to hide their national identity by avoiding their mother languages, and adopting customs of White America (Au,

Brown & Calderón, 2016). Their hope was that by assimilating and demonstrating as little from their background as possible, they would avoid discrimination and be treated as equals.

Some Muslims in the United States take this route as well. John H. Morgan (2014) writes about the de-ethnicization of immigrants as the abandoning of their customs and rituals, and a re-enculturalization as adopting the culture of the new land they move to (Morgan, 2014). He argues that the de-ethnicization and re-enculturalization of Islam in the West is inevitable. He draws on historical examples of Judaism in the West and how most American Jews slowly assimilated to American culture. Morgan argues that the assimilation of Muslims into American culture should be embraced by Muslims living in this country.

Morgan (2014) illustrates the rising trend in “spirituality” versus “religiosity” in America. He explains that many Americans see themselves as spiritual people without having the ties to an organized religion with obligations and accountability. He continues to explain how this trend is appearing in the Muslim-American community as well:

“Being an American Muslim no longer implies involvement in Friday prayers or the religious life of the *masjid* [mosque]. Being attached to the faith community by virtue of merely casual uses of certain religio-cultural expressions, symbols, sensibilities, and ideological indicators is becoming the normative behavior of 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims in America” (p.5).

While Morgan’s observation of this pattern is sound to some degree, I disagree with his notion that this loss of religiosity is inevitable and necessary in America. As Au, Brown and Calderón explain in their analysis of Chinese and Japanese Americans, regardless of how “assimilated” one may be, in a country governed by White gaze, one’s appearance will always give you away as an “other” (Au, Brown, Calderón, 2014). Jews may have assimilated and

unified into American culture, however racially, most Jews are White. Despite how much of Islam Muslim immigrants may leave behind, many of them will still look different, therefore they may never truly be embraced as “real” Americans. In addition, the assimilation Morgan suggests is antithetical to Dewey’s ideal democratic society.

In *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century*, Nel Noddings (2013) discusses Dewey’s concept of a democracy and analyzes how to apply it to education in today’s world. She writes, “For Dewey, shared interests among diverse groups and among individuals with different talents form the basis of novelty and allow for progress in the continual project of constructing democracy” (p.14). A healthy democracy depends on the diverse ideas and experiences of its participants (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015). It implies that society grows constantly (Dewey, 1927) through experiences between people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and interests. Instead of moving our country forward, if Muslims, or any other group for that matter, assimilated to the monoculture, our country would be held back. It would be stuck in the same place, unable to grow from experiences and inputs of unique perspectives.

Both total assimilation and absolute isolation can be antithetical to an ideal democratic society, and understanding these tensions is integral to understanding the role and responsibility of Islamic schools in developing a Muslim-American identity. The culture that exists in some Islamic schools can be a reaction of immigrants being placed in an American context trying to reconcile a double consciousness (Anderson, 2007): one of their nostalgic collective memories and one of their lived realities in the context of the United States. This conflict leads to a misinformed idea that the American identity and Muslim identity are at odds with one another and cannot exist simultaneously.

### **The Risk of Conflating Culture and Religion**

Leaving everything you know behind and moving to a new land is a daunting task. Immigrants have endured immense struggle and pain to arrive in the United States and start a life for themselves and their families. My father himself will tell stories of sleeping on cardboard boxes, getting stabbed and nearly getting killed, all to make a living to provide for his family. Immigrants have given up so much to come to the United States. Their collective memory, beliefs, and culture may seem to be all they have left of their past and so the yearning to hold on to it is understandable. The collective memory is very powerful and can bring waves of people together through common understanding. However, viewing the collective memory as a superior culture and equating it with religion is a dangerous road to walk.

A study in 2017 with 30 Muslim youth in America found that most second generation Muslims in America have a difficult time distinguishing religion from their culture (Suleiman, 2017). Parents often use religion as a reason to place restrictions on their children and these restrictions reject American culture and experiences. The collective memory of immigrant parents is often in opposition with the experiences of their children. By imposing their own versions of a sometimes nostalgic collective memory on their children, immigrant parents run the risk of Muslim youth becoming fed up with trying to reconcile two cultures, and deciding to abandon the rituals of their parents in order to live in the experiences that they are growing up in. Because culture and religion have been equated, these youth might abandon both. This is what Morgan (2014) referred to as the de-ethnicization and re-enculturation of Muslims in the United States. He is right that this happens, but I have argued that it undermines the ideal democratic society as well as Islamic traditions. Ideal democracy empowers individuals and their uniqueness. Islamic tradition honors indigenous cultures and has a place for them in the religion.

Historically, Islam spread so fast and far because it was welcome to all cultures and lands (Sahin, 2018). To conflate the hegemonic cultures of immigrants' collective memory with a religion that embraces all cultures is contradictory. The concept of *tarbiyah* calls for the empowering of what already exists in a child. In the context of Muslim-Americans, this means to cultivate the American culture that Muslim youth are growing up in, within an Islamic framework, and create rituals that validate these experiences. Islamic schools should break down rituals that entangle culture and religion. By breaking the reverence of the collective memory, Islamic schools can foster environments that cultivate spaces that honor both the Muslim and the American identities of students to create democratic citizens.

### **Part Two: The Goal -- Critically-Engaged Muslim-American Democratic Citizens**

In 1916 John Dewey published *Democracy and Education* in which he presented an argument about the role of education in promoting a democratic society. He explained that society is empty unless its individuals have realized their potential, and individuals become irrelevant unless they are considered integral parts of their society (Dewey, 1916). Sidney Hook was an American philosopher and pupil of Dewey. He describes Dewey's view of democracy below:

The essence of Dewey's view was that democracy was committed to an equality of concern for each individual in the community to develop as a person. Education was the chief means by which those personal capacities were to be discovered and liberated. (Cahn, 2009, p.491).

The ideal democratic society that Dewey argued for is one of a constant give and take. Individuals learn from experiences of interactions with one another, while simultaneously strengthening their own unique personalities, strengths, and talents. According to Dewey, a

democracy is always changing through constant reflection and growth. It involves engaged citizens that “recognize[ing] social interdependency and work[ing] to safeguard social responsibility” (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015, p.2).

America is a diverse nation and every piece must cultivate its identity to make the democratic ideal a reality. Instead of seeking to fit the mold of the dominant culture and status quo, people should nurture the things that make them unique. I believe that for Muslims, this means cultivating a Muslim-American identity, that grounds them in the cosmopolitan nature of Islamic teachings, while embracing the experiences of America.

The phrasing I have chosen in Muslim-American is deliberate. The word “Muslim” is an adjective describing the noun, “American.” It suggests that Muslim-Americans participate in American cultural practices and engage democratically, while being guided by Islamic principles and teachings. The term implies that Muslims have a sound understanding of their tradition, history, and beliefs and that this understanding then is a guide to help them navigate and contribute to the American context meaningfully.

Tsuneshaburo Makiguchi, the founder of value-creating education called Soka Gakkai, illustrated a three-tier model to understand identity. He suggested “we be aware of ourselves as simultaneously citizens of a local community, the national community, and of the world” (Gebert & Joffe, 2007, p.74). These concentric circles of identity described by Makiguchi eloquently illustrate the importance of understanding oneself in order to understand one’s place in the world. Without focusing on the innermost circle, yourself and your local community, the circles have no center. They have nothing to base themselves off of, no direction. Therefore, both the Muslim and American identities should be integral to Muslim-Americans’ growth and understanding of themselves, as well as the growth and thriving of a nation as a more ideal

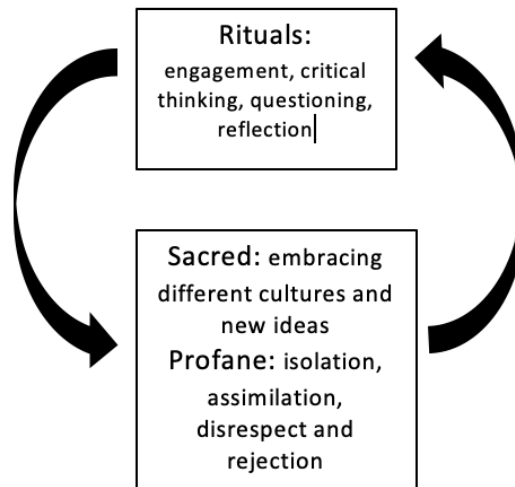


democratic society. I suggest Islamic schools recognize the current cycles of rituals present in their spaces and make way for new rituals that will encourage self-reflection, growth, and the Muslim-American identity.

### **Abandoning Old Rituals and Establishing New**

As Durkheim (2005) mentioned, every person has rituals that they follow, whether they claim to be religious or not. Whatever those rituals are, they establish a sacred that cannot be questioned. The sacred then dictates the same rituals to repeat. This cycle illustrated in Figure A is present in all communities and societies with varying rituals and sacreds. Durkheim's description of rituals is similar to John Dewey's (1934) description of "religious acts" in his book *A Common Faith*. Dewey suggests that religious acts can and should change in order to adapt to meet people's changing needs (Dewey, 1934).

Figure B below illustrates the new set of rituals and the new sacred I suggest for Islamic schools in America. Instead of revering a culture as sacred, these spaces should see understanding and growth as sacred. This will dictate rituals of critical thinking, self-reflecting, and engagement—all practices that have always been valued in the Islamic tradition. I suggest that Islamic schools recognize the need for a critically-engaged Muslim-American identity and establish rituals of questioning and reflecting in order to create a new sacred: growth and understanding.

**Figure B**

Based on the rituals present in some Islamic schools in America, it seems the needs and priorities of education are around sustaining the hegemonic superior culture. However, historically, the priority of education had nothing to do with culture. Hamza Yusuf Hanson is a well-known scholar of Islamic law and spiritual sciences in the United States. He explains the purpose of education in Islam was always to create ethical beings. “Few are allowed to discover life’s greatest pleasure, which is self-knowledge and mastery of the soul that lead to an ethical life” (Yusuf, 2003, p.50). Thinking critically, questioning, and understanding oneself has always been highly regarded in the Islamic tradition because they lead to self-awareness, which leads to meaningful engagement.

Logic was the core subject taught alongside theology and law (Winter, 2010). Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali was a Muslim philosopher and theologian from the 12th century. His works are highly regarded by Muslim scholars and Western philosophers alike. In his discussion on *tasawwuf* and cultivating the self, al-Ghazzali explains the importance of thinking logically and being open to ideas. It is important that children are not restrained, however this does not mean they act freely without anything to ground them. Ghazzali suggests individuals be in a constant

state of reflecting so as to think critically about each situation and grow from them. Ethical beings are created through critical thought (Yusuf, 2003). It is not possible to arrive at understandings if one passively goes through life and does not question and analyze personal experiences. Understanding logic and reflecting is a skill taught very early on in traditional Islamic educational spaces (Hozien & Tuner, 2010), and it is one that leads to critical engagement.

However, because of the influence of Western cultures in the Islamic world, many immigrant families incorrectly equate critical thinking with rejecting religion. By the mid-twentieth century, Western occupation in the Islamic world influenced schools to focus on secular sciences when before they focused on theology and law (Yusuf, 2003). “The West had set out on a path that led to a leveling, nihilistic environment in its schools and institutions that is remarkable for its ability to sustain itself” (Yusuf, 2003, p. 45). It could be argued that because of this shift in focus throughout the post-colonial Islamic world, immigrants to the West now fear that being open to new cultures and intellectual thought can lead to rejecting religion and their collective memory.

The fear of losing the collective memory has led to rituals of disengagement and isolation. I suggest Islamic schools return to their traditional model of education to recreate rituals of engagement, questioning, and self-reflection to establish growth and understanding as the sacred. However, rituals are done so persistently, that it is not a simple task to change them overnight. Islamic schools should revive the tradition of *tarbiyah* and *tasawwuf* in order to reestablish new cycles of rituals to cultivate critically-engaged Democratic Muslim-Americans.

**Cosmopolitan Islam: A Religion Meant for Everyone**

Muhammad ‘ibn ‘Abdullah, commonly known as Prophet Muhammad, is believed by Muslims to have been the final messenger of Islam. His teachings are highly regarded worldwide by every sect of Islam. There is an oft-told story from his life that illustrates the importance of culture in the religion. Once a group of Muslim converts from Ethiopia came to Medinah and began playing drums and dancing in the Prophet’s mosque. One of his companions arose to stop them because the actions did not align with Arabian culture. However, the Prophet stopped him from doing so, and instead not only allowed the Ethiopians to finish their celebrations, but brought his wife out and carried her so she could watch them from above the crowd (Abd-Allah, 2006).

Scholars have interpreted Muhammad’s response to the Ethiopians as a teachable moment for his people. He was driving home the point that just because Islam started in the Arab world does not mean Arabs can impose their culture onto everyone (Abd-Allah, 2006). All cultures and customs are welcome in the religion, and in fact this diversity beautifies the religion even more. Muhammad practiced *tarbiyah* by recognizing the unique celebrations of the Ethiopians and embracing it as within the folds of Islam. He saw it as a way to increase the religion, not diminish it. Islam is not exclusive, meant only for people from a distinct cultural background. As Muhammad demonstrated with the Ethiopians and countless other occasions, as long as they do not conflict with basic Islamic teachings, all cultures are not only welcomed in the religion, but celebrated and honored. Muhammad taught his companions to engage with others to teach them about Islam, but also to grow in their own intellect by learning from different experiences and values.

Immigrant Muslims in this country are, at times, confused and misguided by an ignorance of Islamic history and a misunderstanding of American culture. Some Muslims are ignorant of the value Islam places on indigenous cultures, as illustrated in the story of the Ethiopians. They also misunderstand American culture as being a threat to Islamic teachings. On the contrary, a failure to embrace the cosmopolitan nature of Islam is what threatens the survival of the religion in the country. On the other hand, total assimilation hinders the growth of democratic citizens and a democratic society. I argue that it is imperative for Islamic schools to find the balance between the two in order to develop critically-engaged Muslim-American democratic citizens. This involves simultaneously developing a sound understanding of Islamic values and themselves through reflection, as well as growing through experiences and interactions with others.

### **Democratic Muslim-Americans: Focusing on the Inner-Self**

Steven Rockefeller (2009) discussed Dewey in a lecture at the 6th Annual Ikeda Forum for Intercultural Dialogue. He explained that a “healthy democratic society depends on the ethical faith and quality of character of its individual citizens” (Rockefeller, 2009, para. 22). Quality of character is achieved through self-renewal and reflection, as Dewey discussed, and Islamic schools have the potential to achieve this through the practice of *tasawwuf*. *Tasawwuf* forces individuals to think critically about who they are, the choices they make, and their impact on the world, therefore *tasawwuf* can help Muslim youth understand their experiences in the United States. They may not be able to navigate the context of America thoughtfully until they have understood themselves. It would be like a wheel trying to circulate without a stable hub in the center. Focusing on the inner-self, I believe, is essential for the development of Muslim-American democratic citizens, and it should be encouraged by Muslim educators.

Muslims and Muslim educators can tap into the history of their religious traditions in order to achieve the democratic ideal in the United States. For Islamic schools, this means practicing *tarbiyah* in order for students to practice *tasawwuf*. Muhammad saw that although the celebrations of the Ethiopians were different from Arab culture, they were not a threat to Islamic values. He honored them and this is how Islamic schools in the United States should honor the experiences of Muslim youth. By embracing their realities, they can be encouraged to use these experiences as a tool to propel them into thinking critically, compassionately, and participating democratically. *Tasawwuf* can help cultivate Islamic values to navigate all spaces, not just Islamic ones.

**Islamic schools and the common good: critically-engaged Muslim-Americans.**

Anthony Bryk, Peter Holland, and Valerie Lee (1993) studied Catholic high schools in *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. They found that Catholic schools have a unifying element that binds students and staff together to work toward a common goal. Regardless of student backgrounds, there is a common mission in many Catholic schools, and that is the devotion to God. This commonality can bring people together across differences to work toward the common goal or goodness for all (Bryke, Lee & Holland, 1993).

I believe Islamic schools have the potential to create what Catholic schools like those studied by Bryk, Lee, & Holland created. Through *tarbiyah*, Islamic schools can integrate Islamic values throughout the whole curriculum, influencing how students interact and conduct themselves. A curriculum guided by *tarbiyah* can open minds to a cosmopolitan perspective that recognizes the same values in people outside their immediate communities and build bonds of humanity with them. By embedding self-reflection throughout the curriculum, Islamic schools

can equip Muslim youth with skills to think critically about their community and how they can participate in it meaningfully.

Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah is a prominent Muslim-American scholar of Islam. He grew up in a Protestant family in Georgia and converted to Islam in 1970 after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Abd-Allah's scholarly work is around Islam in the United States, its history and its manifestations. In his essay entitled "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," he discusses the rich cultural history of Islam. "For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law" (Abd-Allah, 2006, p.357). Muslims found ways to weave their cultural practices into their religious practices, without sacrificing the teachings of Islam. Islam became relevant to people in all countries because it had a space for Muslims to engage in the culture and society they lived in while remaining steadfast and connected to their religion (Sahin, 2018).

Abd-Allah eloquently describes Islam as a clear river that flows over rocks. The water from the river remains clear and unchanged. However, as it flows, the diverse colors and forms of the rocks show through the clear waters, and the water refines the rocks, washing away impurities and cleaning them as it flows over them. Islam is similar in this way in that the religion is open and malleable to various cultures so long as the tenets of Islam stay intact. In addition, it empowers Muslims to contribute to their societies, helping to improve them and bring out the best in them, refining the community the way the river refines rocks (Abd-Allah, 2006).

Rami Nashashibi is the founder of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN). Using the arts, he has been able to draw in community members and construct an organization that provides affordable food, healthcare, and employment for individuals on the Southside of Chicago. His work has not gone unnoticed and he was recently named a MacArthur fellow for

his contributions. Using Islamic traditions, Nashashibi has been able to tap into the strengths and talents of communities on the southside and nurture them to benefit their surroundings. For example, CommUNITY Café is a monthly gathering where performers come together to give a voice to issues of social justice and inequalities through visual arts, music, spoken word, and more (“Community Café,” n.d.). Nashishibi and IMAN have created a sense of unity among people which motivates them to move society forward through countless other community programs. IMAN practices *tarbiyah* by recognizing the strengths within the community and nurturing them to empower people to positively impact their society.

At IMAN, ritual performances still exist, however they are not rigidly focused on details such as dress code or cuisine. Instead, IMAN establishes rituals of art, music, poetry, and dance. It has understood how Islam is like a crystal-clear river and it creates a space for individuals from all walks of life to engage with one another without feeling confined by rules and regulations. It celebrates cultures and backgrounds of all people, without sacrificing Islamic law.

Dewey argued that “Democracy must begin at home and its home is the neighborly community” (as cited in Saltmarsh, 2008, p.64). Democracy begins when individuals understand themselves in the context of their own local community. Tsunesaburō Makiguchi emphasized the importance of knowing oneself and one’s history in order to understand the context in which one lives. To impact the world, people need to understand themselves, and this understanding is achieved through constant reflection (Rockefeller, 2009). I believe Muslims must recognize this same model that exists in Islam (*tasawwuf*) and that Islamic schools must speak to this through *tarbiyah*. It is crucial that instead of viewing American culture as a threat to Islam, Islamic schools should provide education that allows Muslim youth to understand the basis of their religion and its history in the context of their realities in the United States. Islamic values and



principles can guide Muslim youth to creating a Muslim-American identity that will contribute to larger society and move our nation forward.

### **Democratic Muslim-Americans: Civic Engagement**

Dewey continues to describe the ideal democratic society as one in which individuals are constantly interacting with one another and their environment. “[Democracy] involves more than formal politics and government; it requires wide and diverse participation; and participation cannot be limited because everyone has something valuable to contribute to the public culture of democracy” (Saltmarsh, 2008, p.66). Dewey’s ideal democracy involves engagement from everyone. If some groups are not contributing, whether by choice or by force, then an ideal democracy does not exist.

Sam F. Stack and Robert A. Waterson (2013) discuss democracy and civic engagement in Dewey’s terms, and help readers find meaning between how the two ideas are related. They write that citizenship is not limited to your rights as a United States citizen, but it also involves responsibilities. Individuals must examine society and find ways to contribute and improve it (Stack & Waterson, 2013). Democratic education must speak to the talents and skills of individuals. It must cultivate these unique potentials so that students can one day contribute to society in purposeful ways.

It could be that Dewey was referring to academic knowledge or physical skills. For instance, a painter can contribute to society by painting a beautiful mural on the side of a run-down building. Or, a distinguished writer can write for a newspaper and contribute by providing insightful stories that move readers. In this same way, Muslims can use their unique identities to contribute to society as well. Civic engagement has a large place in Islamic history. The Prophet Muhammad is recorded as saying, “The best of companions with God is the one who is best to

his companions, and the best of neighbors to God is the one who is the best of them to his neighbor.” Scholars interpret this to mean that the Prophet Muhammad was teaching his people to be good to those around you, regardless of their faith or background. Taking care of one’s community and contributing to it is integral to citizenship.

It is difficult to define what civic engagement looks like because the expectation varies across different groups. All educators encourage participation to some degree, but they all call it “citizenship”. Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (2004) describe three different kinds of citizenship that educators encourage in schools. They use the example of a food drive to describe the personally responsible citizen as one who contributes to the food drive, the participatory citizen as one who organizes the food drive and the justice oriented citizen as one who examines why there is a need for food drives in the first place (Kahne & Westheimer, 2004).

While all of these types of citizens are valuable and necessary in a society, it is the justice-oriented citizen that enacts social change. Most education programs encourage the personally responsible or participatory citizen, however the “emphasis placed on individual character and behavior...distracts attention away from analysis of the causes of social problems and from systemic solutions; that volunteerism and kindness are put forward as ways of avoiding politics and policy” (Kahne & Westheimer, 2004, p.243). Personally responsible and participatory citizenship is necessary, however the justice oriented citizen is what our goal should be. This type of citizenship looks for systemic changes that can solve inequalities instead of simply volunteering time or money to put a band-aid on the issue. Justice oriented citizenship requires a critical understanding of the context and history of the country, and this can only be achieved if one has a sound understanding of oneself first. Through self-reflection and *tasawwuf*, Islamic schools can encourage this type of critical thinking to develop justice oriented Muslim-

American citizens that utilize their Islamic values and backgrounds to improve society; just as the clear river does as it passes over rocks.

Civic engagement is a major part of being a meaningful member of a society and nation, both Islamically and democratically. Citizenship education means respect for those from different backgrounds and lifestyles. It means recognizing the rights and worth of all human beings (Stacks & Waterson, 2013). It gives students the opportunity to engage with others and provides a space for the interplay between diverse interests to exist. Values are not simply handed down, but they are created through dialogue and interactions between diverse groups (Noddings, 2013).

The idea of citizenship and respect for all is one that is prominent in Islam as well, therefore I believe Islamic schools should develop this understanding in their students. Muslims can contribute uniquely and immensely, but not if they cut themselves off the way Islamic schools sometimes do. Without finding a way to give back and engage with the surrounding community, people may become insular and irrelevant to the whole of the country. "...absence of participation tends to produce lack of interest and concern on the part of those shut out. The result is a corresponding lack of effective responsibility" (Dewey, as cited in Saltmarsh, 2008, p.66). Disengagement can result in a lack of belonging, which is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This absence of belonging can result in a sense of anxiety and isolation, which is a dangerous path to walk for an already marginalized community, such as the Muslims in the United States.

Just as isolation can prevent engagement, so can total assimilation. In his discussion of his findings, Omar Suleiman writes on the importance of being grounded in one's background in order to contribute meaningfully.

If young people are not confident in their faith and identity, their sense of contribution is either abolished, or motivated through other frameworks. This feeling is the pursuit of greatness comes through breaking the shackles of Islam and the Muslim identity rather than embracing it. (Sulieman, 2017, p.19).

In Suleiman's study, 16 of the 20 Muslim youth interviewed said they felt Islam and their Muslim identity prevented them from pursuing their dreams. It is not the religion that has done this to people, but what others had made of the religion. Internalized racism and ignorance of their tradition leads some Muslim youth to believe that Islam is stifling. They think that they can only accomplish great things if they operate outside the bounds of the religion, however if they had a basic understanding in the tradition and its teachings, they would see how much Islam actually has to offer and how many positive contributions can be made through its lens.

Cultivating a dynamic identity based in confidence and conviction can result in Muslim youth that take ownership of their community and feel valued to engage with society as a whole (Suleiman, 2017). To claim their space in the United States, I believe Muslims must draw on their histories and traditions to practice *tarbiyah*. Through *tarbiyah*, Islamic schools can nurture the unique potentials within students to empower them to contribute and make positive changes in their world. They must work in ways that will benefit the people around them. They must find those in need and help them, recognize ills in the community and use their strengths to cure them. Through *tarbiyah*, they must conduct themselves in the way the Islam teaches them to, but also in the way an American citizen is expected to and develop a critically-engaged, Muslim-American, democratic identity.

### **Part Three: The Solution - *Tarbiyah* and *Tasawwuf* for Democratic Citizenship**

The word *tarbiyah* itself has a very powerful meaning in Arabic. A very basic translation would be “education.” However, the word implies so much more than that. Classical lexicographer al-Rāghib al-Asfahānī (d. 402 A.H. /1011 C.E.) wrote that the word *tarbiyah* means “to cause something to develop from stage to stage until reaching its completion [full potential]” (as cited in Tauhidi, 2007, p.9). This suggests that something already exists in the child, and education is not meant to dispense facts upon students, rather it is a means to bring out the power and potential that already exists within them.

The Prophet Muhammad exemplified *tarbiyah* in his interactions with not just children, but his companions as well. For example, in the beginning of Islamic history, one of Muhammad’s greatest enemies was an Arab chieftain, Umar al-Khattab. He was a powerful but violent man who attempted to murder Muhammad on many instances. While maintaining his confidence and being steadfast in his beliefs, Muhammad met Umar with kindness, and this approach is what encouraged Umar to eventually accept Islam and become one of Muhammad’s closest friends and disciples (Afsaruddin, n.d.). Muhammad cultivated Umar’s tenacity into perseverance that helped the Muslims grow in large waves and protect themselves from those that wanted to destroy them. Instead of driving the fire out of Umar, Muhammad nurtured it because that was Umar’s personality and who he was.

I believe that *tarbiyah* can be a valuable approach for educators. It can encourage them to understand each student’s nature and disposition and work to cultivate these in directions that help the student grow and mature for the betterment of the community and society. In order to nurture innate potential within students, educators must be able to recognize what that potential is and facilitate students in recognizing it within themselves through *tasawwuf*. *Tasawwuf* is a personal practice, whereas *tarbiyah* involves dealing with others. The two concepts are closely

related in that educators that artfully practice *tarbiyah* can guide students to practice *tasawwuf*. *Tasawwuf* can lead students to recognizing their capacities and *tarbiyah* can lead educators to nurturing those capacities to their fruition.

*Tasawwuf* and *Tarbiyah* are not practices that can be limited to a class or subject. In order for them to have a substantial and lasting impact, they must be practiced throughout an entire learning experience. Dawud Tauhidi was a researcher and curriculum developer in Islamic education in the United States. He co-founded Crescent Academy, a prominent Islamic school in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. For over ten years, Tauhidi worked to develop an integrated learning model he called “The *Tarbiyah* Project.” Its goal is to provide a learning model that integrates Islamic values into the secular curriculum. Tauhidi argues that through experiential learning, *tarbiyah* can prepare students “with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed to function successfully as Muslims in society” (Tauhidi, 2007, p.9). Islamic education should teach Muslim youth how to meaningfully navigate the contexts that they live in, while upholding their beliefs and respecting the differences in others. However, some Islamic schools have separated Islamic education and secular education (Timani, 2006) which is problematic. Tauhidi (2007) explains that Islamic education should be integrated into all subject areas. *Tarbiyah* encourages this type of integration. Tauhidi describes the classical model of education and how Islamic schools today must return to it:

“The Prophetic model of Islamic education drew its substance from the everyday experiences and day-to-day problems of the early Muslim community. Although Islamic education will undoubtedly draw much of its content from the foundational disciplines of Islamic studies...it must be done in a way that links this content to the natural concerns of

students as well as the larger issues facing the world in which they live.” (Tauhidi, 2007, p. 13).

*Tarbiyah* is a way of empowering what already exists in children--in this case, the Western culture that Muslim youth are naturally influenced by. Tauhidi developed a framework to help educators integrate Islamic values throughout the curriculum so that the American context and Islamic values are not seen as mutually exclusive. Students are more likely to develop as engaged Muslims and as critical thinkers if Islamic values are taught throughout the whole curriculum- not just in Islamic studies classes. Values are consolidated through self-reflection (Rockefeller, 2009). Through *tasawwuf*, students can begin to understand themselves and recognize shared values and humanity in others as well (Gebert, 2009). I believe this will encourage them to engage with others, learn from them, and contribute to the world in unique ways. The *tarbiyah* model is very similar to the models of democratic and experiential education described by John Dewey—models he argued held most promise for promoting a more ideal democratic society.

### ***Tarbiyah in Practice***

American education philosopher, Robert Hutchins, writes, “the death of democracy is not likely to be from assassination or ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment” (as cited in Stack & Waterson, 2013, p.199). Democracy is more than just legal responsibilities like voting and paying taxes. To be democratic citizens, individuals must engage with one another, honor differences, and display a level of care and understanding with others. It involves inner transformation that leads to value creation for oneself and one’s surroundings. A democratic education does not arise from dispensing facts from teachers to students, nor can values be taught this way. This is why *tarbiyah* presents a particularly

important model of democratic education. Done well, it can permeate all aspects of the curriculum, and through its Quranic basis, it urges individuals to self-reflect and be in a constant state of self-renewal. Through *tarbiyah* values can be implemented by teachers and students alike, and though to some it may seem too idealistic, it is not far-fetched at all.

Al-Fatih Academy is an Islamic school in Reston, Virginia. Its mission statement states that the school was established in 1999 to “cultivate and nurture a thriving American Muslim identity that balances religious, academic, and cultural knowledge and imparts the importance of civic involvement and charitable work” (Gjelten, 2017). Many Islamic schools have mission statements like this, that emphasize the Muslim-American identity. Al-Fatih is actually practicing it throughout the curriculum and interactions between students and teachers.

When in science class learning about planets, students are reminded of verses from the Quran that explain the wonder of the solar system. All eighth graders in Virginia learn civics in social studies. However, eighth graders at Al-Fatih learn through experience by writing letters to state representatives about issues that concern them (Gjelten, 2017). These are examples of how Al-Fatih does not limit learning to memorizing facts and taking tests. Learning takes place in activities and projects that encourage critical thought and self-reflection.

In an article with NPR, Tom Gjelten writes, “The school directors aim to bring the students’ Muslim and American identities into a single whole, a goal that responds in part to the frustrations they themselves felt as young immigrant Muslims” (Gjelten, 2017). Al-Fatih aims to bridge the gap between a Muslim identity and an American identity by encouraging critical thinking throughout the curriculum. Consider how co-director of Al-Fatih, Afeefa Syeed discusses student responses to the San Bernardino shootings in 2015:



"They would say, 'This was a Muslim guy! This was a Muslim woman!' [...] And as they're talking, they're saying, 'But that's not what a Muslim does. How could they even think to do that?' And they're clearly thinking through this, without us just spooning them the answers, because we've created a climate here where we have them think through what it means to be a person of faith and specifically what it means to be Muslim." (Gjelten, 2017, para. 19).

The students' understanding of their faith allows them to think critically about the events that conspired in San Bernardino. They are able to process attacks in relation to what they know about their religion and this country to draw conclusions of injustice. This thought process is something students become accustomed to, not one that just emerges suddenly in the wake of tragedy. The climate at Al-Fatih encourages this self-reflection through *tarbiyah*. The student-teacher relationship is crucial in facilitating this critical thinking. Teachers must know and understand who their students are and where they come from in order to cultivate them to their potential. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1936) explains how the student-teacher relationship is akin to the teacher being a "servant of chrysanthemums." "If teachers fully embodied the spirit of one who is a servant of chrysanthemums, determined to bring beautiful flowers to bloom, education would succeed without fail" (Makiguchi, 1936, p.245). *Tarbiyah* recognizes the innate abilities within students and cultivates them to their potential. Al-Fatih exemplifies *tarbiyah* in this way by encouraging critical thought and developing values.

### **Tarbiyah, Tasawwuf, and the Critically Engaged**

A critically-engaged democratic identity informed by Islamic teachings is not unthinkable. Ilhan Omar, for example, is the first Muslim woman elected to Congress. As a public servant adorning a *hijab*, she is someone who is grounded in her Muslim roots while

making meaningful contributions to the country. While not every Muslim-American is meant to be involved in politics, there are many other ways to be an engaged democratic citizen. In his book entitled, *What is an American Muslim?* Abdullah Ahmed An-na'im (2014) describes religious self-determination as being a Muslim by choice and individual honest conviction.

“Conscious reflection and moral choice are integral to Muslim identity (An-Na'im, 2014, p.4).

There are countless passages in the Quran that encourage Muslims to deliberate, reflect, and think critically. Abdullah Sahin (2018) describes what Islamic education used to look like, and it is important to understand this in order to appreciate the potential Islamic schools having in developing critically engaged democratic citizens:

“*Madrasah*, literally ‘place of study’, originally emerged as a private affair formed around inspiring religious teachers, with small study circles (*halaqa*) taking place in special meeting places (*majlis*) where the values of intellectual engagement, friendship and sense of a ‘learning community’ were nurtured. Learning was not confined to knowledge retention but, as in its original Arabic, knowledge (*ilm*) is meant to be a sign pointing towards grasping a deeper reality...’*ilm* meant developing inner engagement, inspired intimacy, attachment and embodied awareness.” (p.9).

In classical Muslim communities, knowledge was not learned through memorization of facts, but it was discovered and turned into values through dialogue, experiences, and self-reflection. Seeking knowledge has always been a high value in Islam. Mohamad Abdalla, Muhammad Abdullah, and Dylan Chown (2018) discuss the evolution of seeking and imparting knowledge throughout Islamic history. Learning was so valuable that the Muslims took Greek traditions of philosophy and logic and translated them into Arabic. They were able to take ancient texts and make them accessible to everyone which resulted in an abundance of

knowledge and the establishments of the two oldest Universities in the world (Qarawiyyin in Morocco and Al-Azhar in Egypt). “These educational institutions were sophisticated, structured, and had their own intelligible logic. The result was a universal, cosmopolitan, and highly sophisticated educational system that influenced the East and West alike” (p.2). Once again acting like the clear river, Islam guided Muslims to grow from experiences and self-reflect to strengthen their practices which in turn benefited the whole world.

### **Experiential Education for Democratic Citizenship**

John Dewey emphasized the importance of experiential learning for a democratic society. He is critical of teaching methods that remain the same despite the variation of students’ needs and interests. Dewey argued for education to mirror the abilities of students, and for educators to avoid seeing education as bodies of facts and skills to be simply passed on to students (Dewey, 1938). Instead, knowledge should be experienced and discovered by students so that they can think critically about how they can use it in ways to contribute to society.

Islamic education has always highly valued critical thinking and experiential learning, so much so that other traditions from around the world modeled their education system off of the Islamic world (Abdalla, Abdullah & Chown, 2018). Despite this, however, some Islamic schools seem to have fallen into the routine of banking education by simply dispensing knowledge onto students, without cultivating that knowledge into wisdom that will then permeate into all areas of life. Islamic knowledge is more than just a mere memorization of facts and practices, but it is an acquisition of a way of life. It is to have Islamic principles penetrate through all aspects of school and interactions so that people will have more meaningful and respectful relationships in a multicultural and diverse nation (Hussin & Tamuri, 2019).

Similarly, in their discussion of civic education, Stack and Waterson (2013) write, “the central aim of civic education is to foster responsibility and participation” (p.198). However, often times civic education in schools is limited to simply learning rules and regulations around things like voting and paying taxes. The authors write that civic education should permeate all aspects of the curriculum and inspire students to be socially responsible democratic citizens (Stack & Waterson, 2013). In this same way, Islamic education must inspire students to be moral, compassionate democratic citizens.

While a sound Islamic education in Quran, theology, and Islamic history is important, Islamic education is not limited to these things. Garbi Schmidt (2004b) described the frustration of Islamic Studies teachers at the school she studied.

“The Islamic studies was limited to the mere basics, a situation that these teachers interpreted as eroding the very purpose of the schools. The essential question raised in such discussions was why an Islamic educational system should be kept alive if there was no fundamental difference between Islamic schools and the public schools” (p. 69).

The teachers here raised a valuable question, which I believe Islamic schools should consider. What is the benefit of sending children to Islamic schools if their experience is no different from public schools? As Dawud Tauhidi argues, Islamic education should not be limited to facts and memorization, but should include values that permeate all aspects of the curriculum, including things like discipline and teacher-student interactions.

In The *Tarbiyah* Project, Tauhidi creates a framework that integrates Islamic education throughout the entire curriculum, across all subject areas. Students should be learning how to be good, thoughtful Muslims, and not just by what their teachers tell them, but through experiential learning and value creating (Tauhidi, 2007). This cannot be limited to one or two classes

throughout the day. Some Muslim students are getting a shallow understanding of their deep tradition. With an understanding that just scratches the surface, I believe they will be unable to apply the wisdom into the real world and make meaningful contributions.

Critical thinking and values are not developed through dispensing facts to students dogmatically. Instead, teachers must “give reasons, encourage questions, and abandon rules that do not stand up under critical examination” (Noddings, 1993, p.140). Through *tarbiyah*, educators and students alike can critically examine the hegemonic culture that has been created through collective memories, and work together to dismantle the rituals that have them revere it as sacred. Islamic schools cannot create a healthy Muslim-American identity until Muslim youth feel empowered by, instead of embarrassed of, their Americanness.

Similarly, value creation (like that described by Buddhist scholars Ikeda and Makiguchi) is Islamic education. Through the reflection that the Quran encourages, people can internalize values of wisdom, courage and compassion (Obelleiro, 2012). I believe that if *tarbiyah* is practiced carefully in Islamic schools, students and teachers can begin to think critically about the rituals they engage in and create values that will dismantle the hegemonic culture and make room for the Muslim-American identity to develop.

### **Conclusion: Afros, Tattoos, and Lost Opportunities**

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”

- *The Holy Quran, Chapter 49*

The United States is a complex society with people from all over the world living in one place. Without having roots to ground them, Muslim youth can easily be blown away into

confusion by the winds of misunderstandings and self-doubt. There are many obstacles they encounter in trying to distinguish an identity for themselves. From the collective memory of their parents clashing with the memories they experience as Americans, to the Islamophobia and discrimination they encounter as Muslims, I can say from personal experience that it can be difficult to reconcile the conflicts between societal expectations, familial expectations, and personal desires. Without a sound center to guide them, some Muslim youth can either isolate themselves, or turn to culture-denying assimilation, both of which are in opposition to the promise of an ideal democracy and the development of critically-engaged citizens.

There is a perceived gap between the Muslim and American identity and that the two are mutually exclusive. Immigrant communities come to the United States with a collective memory which can translate into a hegemonic and nostalgic culture they create in their schools. Instead of working toward creating a unique Muslim-American identity, they sometimes begin to either assimilate by rejecting parts of their religion or isolate themselves in order to preserve the collective imagined past of their parents. Both strategies move further from the democratic ideal described by Dewey, and are antithetical to the teachings of Islamic schools themselves. As illustrated by the quote from the Quran at the start of this section, the religion honors and respects all the differences of the world. Absolute isolation and total assimilation in a way rejects the culture of the America or the teachings of Islam, respectively.

Through understanding their own traditions, Islamic schools can begin to embrace the culture that Muslim youth are growing up with in America. This will allow them to help their students grow with confidence into their unique Muslim-American identities, and not feel like they have to choose one or the other. There is great power and potential in Muslim-American identities, especially those that engage with society and contribute through the lens of a rich and

meaningful Islamic tradition. Muslim-Americans *are* democratic citizens. The cultivation of a Muslim-American identity, therefore is not just imperative for the survival of Islam among the Muslim diaspora, but it is imperative for the United States to thrive.

I often ponder about how the Colin Kaepernick situation might have played out had my school culture been practicing *tarbiyah* in the ways discussed throughout this paper. I would have liked to see discussions about how Kaepernick's example could be applied to our lives as Muslim-Americans. Perhaps the principal could have stepped in to compare Kaepernick with other sports figures of social justice that we revere like Mohammed Ali, Tommie Smith or John Carlos. There could have been a powerful discussion about how these athletes protested injustices and at the time were also seen as controversial. Their example stood the test of time and decades later they are celebrated in classrooms as heroes of justice and change, so perhaps the same could be said about Kaepernick years from now?

It could have been a momentous lesson and discussion had my school culture been open to the idea of *tarbiyah*, but what about me, the teacher? What if I was personally practicing *tasawwuf*? It is easy to say things could have been different if external factors had changed, but what about the inner factors? Through the practice of *tasawwuf* I could have critically analyzed the situation and overcame my apprehension to confidently speak up to my principal. I could have made my position clear and facilitated all the above mentioned discussions myself. Hindsight is 20/20, and unfortunately at the time I was too nervous about what people might have said, what challenges I might have faced, or what toes I might have stepped on had I carried on with revering Kaepernick in my classroom—what rituals I might have broken. I knew his example was valuable, but the rituals were so deeply engrained, even in myself: a person who recognized them and wanted to undo them.

My goal for Islamic education in this country is for Muslim youth to develop the identity that I wish I had myself. A Muslim-American identity is not just about celebrating American holidays while wearing *hijab*, or eating *halal* hamburgers and fried chicken. The Muslim-American identity I advocate for is cosmopolitan, critically thinking, and democratically engaged. It is bold in its beliefs and hopeful that these beliefs can help the progress of its country. This identity is rich, complex, and necessary for the survival of Islam in the United States, and for the growth of the society as a whole.



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